

Wrestling Perspective

• Analysis and Commentary From The McLaughlin Group of Professional Wrestling •

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Musical Bookers Is Not The Answer To The NWA's Problems

No matter what the NWA's management might think, Dusty Rhodes is not a savior. Rhodes has been, at times, an excellent booker who has given fans dozens of memorable angles and matches. But, the solution to the promotion's woes is not a new booker. Hiring Rhodes is similar to the way the New York Yankees repeatedly called on Billy Martin to save them. Everyone had high hopes and Martin was able to briefly turn things around, but the problems ran much deeper than the manager and in the end, the change had little effect other than giving sports reporters a continuing soap opera to write about. Similarly, the NWA's problems go far beyond who is booking the promotion. A new leader may help, but until the NWA's organizational and management problems are solved, he will, ultimately, be ineffective.

Since Rhodes' departure, the only booker who had any consistent success with television ratings and Pay-Per-View buy rates was Ric Flair. The only booker who maintained a decent level of house show attendance was George Scott. Scott lasted 13 weeks and admittedly did not know how to promote television and PPVs. Flair lasted six months and while his television ratings and PPV buy rates were solid, house show attendance dropped dramatically. Outside of Flair and Scott, Jim Crockett and various committees including talented people like Jim Cornette, Terry Funk and Kevin Sullivan were used to book the NWA. While they sometimes provided entertaining angles and matches, in the end, they were ineffective and seven months ago the NWA decided to hire Ole Anderson as its booker.

Anderson had his ups and downs during his seven-month tenure as booker. Ratings for World Championship Wrestling were solid, if not excellent. PPV buy rates were respectable, but not great. Yet, there was some continuity for the first time since Rhodes was ousted from his booking position two years ago. Anderson provided a Clash with the two most watched matches on cable of all time. He also carried the same Black Scorpion gimmick, that help provide the solid ratings to its death and then two months beyond, at the cost of house show attendance. He was also responsible for weak ratings and insensible booking on the last Clash. In his defense, he knew his time had run out as booker and probably did not put a great deal of effort into the last Clash. However, he was still collecting a paycheck and if he truly just gave up on the last Clash, it says little about his moral fiber, even if the handwriting was on the wall. Anderson lost several talented performers while booking the promotion including Funk, Cornette, Stan Lane, Cactus Jack and Mark Callous. In turn, he brought in, to the delight of many hardcores, Stan Hansen. He brought in Paul Orndorff and lost him. He brought in the Nasty Boys, got them hot and the NWA lost them. He brought in people way past their prime like the Junkyard Dog, Moondog Rex and Thunderbolt Patterson. He brought in green wrestlers not ready for the NWA like J.W. Storm, the Master Blasters, the Nightstalker, the Big Cat and the Motor City Madman. But was that in response to the constant pressure to bring in fresh young talent? In the end, Anderson tried to recreate 1974 and it didn't work as house show attendance became embarrassing and moral was at an all-time low. Anderson at least tried and if the NWA had expected a more solid performance, they should have looked at his resume; in particular the period between 1982-1984.

Anderson was with the NWA for seven months and really was probably on his way out after six. Six months is simply, not enough time to turn the NWA around. No one, and this includes Rhodes, Bill Watts, Funk, Eddie Gilbert and even Pat Patterson, can make the NWA a successful organization in half a year. There are too many problems within the company; many that go far beyond the control of the booker, to have the situation solved in a six month time frame. Anderson made some progress and some errors, but the NWA brass became impatient and demanded quicker results than he was able to provide. The problem is no one is going to provide the results quick enough for the NWA's satisfaction. Since Rhodes was dumped two years ago, the NWA has gone through four bookers and numerous committees. No one has been given the chance to work out the kinks and move ahead. How can the NWA expect its booker to be successful when it fails to address the problems it faces and allow the booker the chance to deal with them? If nothing else, given the corporate mentality and bureaucracy a new booker will face, shouldn't the NWA give a new booker at least three months to become acclimated to the environment before expecting results? Shouldn't they wait at least one year to evaluate the effectiveness of the new booker? Removing Anderson was a change, not based on his performance, but a change for the sake of change. It was a search for a miracle worker. Until the NWA realizes its problems are within its own organizational framework and philosophy and until they decide what audience to target and effectively market toward that audience, not only won't they find a miracle worker, they won't even find someone who can be remotely successful.

Rhodes had this position before, but the circumstances were different. With Jim Crockett Promotions, Rhodes was virtually given a carte blanche on the organization. When he attempted to exert that same type of control after the Turner purchase, he lost his job, went to Florida to find he had little drawing power and then went to the WWF, where he lost his dignity. Many insiders would say the current situation in the NWA can be traced back to many of the decisions Rhodes made while he was the NWA's booker. Certainly, Rhodes made a number of moves that were as incomprehensible as many of Anderson's booking decisions. Under Rhodes, the UWF was purchased and then systematically dismantled, almost all the wrestlers were lost in a process that made little sense as only Rick Steiner and Sting remained from the UWF. Rhodes was responsible for running the company into bankruptcy and pushed himself above more marketable stars. A number of talented wrestlers left the NWA or refused to join the NWA specifically because they did not want to work for Rhodes. Were Dusty booking the NWA over the past two years, it is doubtful we ever would have seen the Flair vs. Ricky Steamboat classics or cards as excellent as WrestleWar '89, Bash '89 or Bash '90. The NWA probably would not have acquired Brian Pillman, Terry Taylor and Tom Zenk if Rhodes were in charge and Arn Anderson's return would have been less likely. But, this is speculation. Had Dusty been booking, we may never have seen Cornette and Lane depart. We don't know what Rhodes would have done over the past two years. We do know he is being given the opportunity of a lifetime and he would be a fool to ruin it because of his ego or personal differences with talented wrestlers. These were the same faults that lead to the NWA's downfall and his firing. Faults that must be eliminated if he is to be successful this time around.

Rhodes certainly has had his moments. Until he joined the WWF, we enjoyed his character, even though it was at the expense of many talented wrestlers. He came up with a number of angles that were inventive and enjoyable. The NWA tapes from 1985-86 are fun to watch as he came up with ideas that were entertaining and, at times, very successful. He is respected by many wrestlers who worked for him as the Bobby Jagger interview in Rasslin' Riot attested. Even Chris Adams admitted in the Pro Wrestling Torch Weekly interview that he has a great deal of respect for Rhodes. While he also eventually ruined the promotion with personality conflicts, ego and possibly burnout, the past record would indicate he is capable of being inventive and successful. For Rhodes to be successful now, he must examine his past successes and failures and more importantly, learn from them. He must realize that his ego must be set aside. As glorious as Dusty's career was, save for the possibility of a retirement tour (an idea that might be successful), it is now over. If he is to be successful, he must realize that and choose to excel in his new career: that of NWA booker. He must not try to live through his son and make the same

mistakes with Dustin he made with himself. Dustin has potential, but he must make it on his own, not because of or in spite of his father. Rhodes must resolve personal differences with talented wrestlers that could help his promotion like Steamboat, Ted DiBiase and Taylor. This is a business, not a social gathering. Politics caused the the NWA to lose Steamboat, Gilbert, Lane, Cornette and, for a while, Paul E. Dangerously. The NWA can ill afford to have politics cost them any more talent. In 1985 and 1986, Rhodes showed his great potential as the NWA's booker. Now he must learn from his mistakes and prove he can be a great booker as his career depends on it.

Whether or not Rhodes will be successful depends, in part, on what the NWA expects of him. If the NWA demands instant results, Rhodes will provide hotshot angles that will give the NWA some instant success. The problem is there are not quick solutions to the NWA's problems and hot shooting will only be successful for so long before it causes confusion and burnout. There are no instant answers. Instead, the NWA must allow Rhodes to develop and implement a long term plan for success. Rather than expecting quick results, the NWA must settle for a gradual change in house show attendance and television ratings. In fact, the NWA should not be surprised if there is an even further drop in attendance as Rhodes takes over. Surely he will change some things that may not be initially well received. Rhodes must be given time and respect if he is to be successful. He must not have to constantly worry about job security. The NWA needs to work with their booker, not against him. Rhodes may not come up with the perfect plan, and surely modifications will be necessary as times change, but he must be given a chance to fix the company. For better or for worse, the NWA has chosen Rhodes as its new booker. They must now stick by that decision and give him at least one year to be effective in his new role. Overnight solutions do not exist and if the NWA insists on them, they will find themselves in a worse situation than they are currently in. The NWA, like Rhodes, must learn from its mistakes and resolve to correct the problems that have so far prevented it from being successful. With a talent base that includes Flair, the Steiners, Lex Luger, Sting, Doom, Bobby Eaton, Mike Rotunda, Barry Windham, Arn Anderson, Taylor, Pillman, Zenk, the Freebirds and yes, Sid Vicious, there is little reason why the NWA cannot be successful if they make an honest attempt to correct their problems and provide Rhodes with the time he needs to work with this outstanding talent base.

Will Dusty "The American Dream and Bull of The Woods" Rhodes, be successful as the NWA's new booker? We don't know. Will the NWA give him a fair chance? we don't know. All we are saying is give Rhodes at least a year to work this situation out. All we are saying is for the NWA to recognize their problems and work diligently to correct them. The future of the NWA and the future of quality wrestling in the U.S. depends upon it. With that thought in mind, we wish Rhodes the best of luck in his new position. In fact, we're counting on it.

Sidelines

Thanks To Brian Tramel, Wade Keller and Mike Gunderloy for the plugs. We appreciate their help and your continued support.

Our Get Well Wishes go out to Wrestling Perspective reader and contributor Jeff Rubin who is recovering from surgery on his back. Get well and take care.

Matwatch is one of the top wrestling newsletters today. Steve Beverly provides weekly news, analysis, television ratings and rundowns and headlines with solid writing and insight. Topped off by Beverly's broadcast news background, he is able to provide wrestling analysis from a television perspective that is unparalleled. Highly Recommended. Matwatch is available from Steve Beverly, 16 Robin Hood Lane, Jackson, TN 38305. The cost is \$5.00 for five issues, \$10 for 11 issues and \$15 for 16 issues.

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Book Review

By - Paul J. MacArthur

Drawing Heat

Drawing Heat is the exceptional documentation of how a small independent promoter operated a summer tour in Canada during the early eighties. Written by Ontario based anthropologist Jim Freedman, Drawing Heat details how the Dave "The Canadian Wildman" McKigney ran a small wrestling promotion trying to make some money and survive the numerous attempts by Jack and Frank Tunney to run him out of business. This is the story of how independent promoters used to tour their regions as the Wildman had a small group of wrestlers in his stable and would pick up other wrestlers for various parts of his tour. We see the Wildman working on shoestring budget, trying to pay the wrestlers, attract a crowd, promote the event and take home enough money to tide him over during the off season. Although he had a small budget and his wrestlers were mostly past their peak, the Wildman put more effort into each of the cities his crew appeared in than the NWA puts into every city except Atlanta and New York.

Drawing Heat details how the Wildman worked with numerous famous wrestlers including the Original Sheik, Chris Tolos, Luis Martinez and Smokey the Wrestling Bear. There are stories about each of these wrestlers and many others. Of all the wrestlers Freedman meets, the Sheik, not surprisingly, was probably the most fascinating with Chris Tolos a close second. They had very different approaches to the business, but each was successful and Freedman is successful in giving us a taste of their personalities. In fact, he is able to effectively convey all the personalities he came into contact with while he toured with the Wildman's promotion and thus gives us an excellent sampling of the wrestling business. We see the consummate professional, the green wrestler on his first tour and men past their prime just working because they love the sport. We also follow the struggles of a small promoter and Freedman is able to portray the sensitive side of a wrestler that is rarely seen.

There is much more to this book. Freedman gives excellent descriptions of the matches he sees and the crowds reactions. Nostalgia buffs will love the stories about matches with Ric Flair, the Iron Sheik, Dewey Robertson and Angelo Mosca had in Canada during the early eighties. If the book has a fault, it is that Freedman tends to over analyze the personalities of the fans and at times some of his psychological conclusions seem to be without merit.

But this is a minor fault in an otherwise fantastic book. Drawing Heat is a must for anyone who ever wanted to know how a small independent promotion was operated prior to the WWF's national take over. *Highly Recommended.*

Drawing Heat by Jim Freedman is available from Firefly Books, 3520 Pharmacy Avenue 1-C, Scarborough, Ontario Canada M1W 2T8 for \$14.95.

WCW Finally Gives Its Mid-Level Talent A Chance

By - David Skolnick

Who would have thought four months ago that Tom Zenk would be coming off a World Television Championship reign and one of the hottest faces in the NWA? Or, who would have envisioned that Mike Rotunda would be featured in USA Today and become one of the best heel acts in less than a months time? How about the fact that Bobby Eaton, a great tag team wrestler who was all but buried a few months ago, is now one of the fastest rising singles stars in the company. After months of having its mid-level talent do countless numbers of jobs, the NWA has finally decided to give these excellent wrestlers well-deserved pushes.

Zenk, Rotunda and Eaton as well as Brian Pillman and Terry Taylor make up the second half of the NWA top ten, but each has done dozens of jobs and have been passed over for pushes. It seems as though a wrestler in the NWA has to be jobbed out of all credibility before the promotion decides to push them. Case in point: Doom. Ron Simmons and Butch Reed looked up into the lights almost every night for the Steiners and the Road Warriors 8 to 12 months ago. They even put over the Samoan Swat Team at Starrcade '89 and ended the Iron team competition with zero points and zero credibility. They were often referred to as "Doomed." But, after several months of being made the fool, the NWA started to push them. They are now the World Tag Team Champions and top contenders for Tag Team of the Year honors.

In Zenk's case, his push must seem like a miracle. The company did everything in its power to force Zenk to quit before his contract was up. They humiliated him at many house shows and on television having him lose to preliminary wrestlers. The two most memorable matches he had in the past six months were squash losses to Big Van Vader at the Bash and to Stan Hansen on a Clash. Obviously the NWA feels the presence of Joe Pedicino's proposed promotion. Any wrestler not under contract with the NWA is fair game for Pedicino and the WWF; example, the Nasty Boys. Perhaps the NWA recognized the Z-Man has talent and some charisma and decided that since he's under contract, he would be given the push of a lifetime. With his renewed push and ringing endorsements from Jim Ross, those jobs he did on TV are somewhat harder to recall.

With Rotunda, his push could not have come at a better time. His contract is nearly up (hopefully he'll get re-signed soon) and he was virtually ignored during Ole Anderson's tenure as booker. The Michael Wall Street gimmick is certainly nothing new, but what Rotunda has done with it is truly remarkable. he has always been considered an excellent tactician who showed great heel charisma as a member of the Varsity Club. However, few fans could have anticipated how well he has done with the gimmick. He has received more mainstream publicity than any other NWA wrestler and is one of the few heels who are actually booed at the arenas. His excitement with the push and his new role can plainly be seen on his face and in the ring. He loves this role and it shows. His feud with Taylor has brought some excitement back to mid-level matches. Yet, it's unfortunate that someone as talented as Taylor has been overlooked for a push, but at least he hasn't been buried and his matches with Arn Anderson restored some of his credibility.

Eaton is without a doubt, one of the best wrestlers in the game, but the NWA decided to ignore him as well as Stan Lane and Jim Cornette. Perhaps it was good for Eaton to lose his partners and be on his own. Cornette clashed with the top brass on a number of occasions and that may have prolonged the burying process of the Midnight Express. Also, the NWA was not interested in Lane and made that fact known last year when they reluctantly re-signed him. The NWA seems dedicated to giving Eaton a strong push as he recently beat Zenk at Starrcade '90 and the promotion has set up a feud for the television title.

It's hard to pinpoint the exact reasons behind the NWA's renewed interest in Zenk, Rotunda and Eaton. It may be due to the fact that Pedicino may emerge or to combat the presence of the WWF. It could be because the NWA finally saw that it needed to restore some credibility to these wrestlers and steer away the recent emphasis on bodybuilders with wrestling talent and experience. Maybe the NWA was testing these wrestlers to see if they would remain loyal to the promotion and not lose patience. Perhaps it's a combination of all of these factors, but I must tip my hat to the NWA officials who finally realized they should look within their own company for talent and not search out cheap, inexperienced talent. They now have two strong heels in Wall Street and Eaton, a top face in Zenk and two other potential strong faces in Taylor and Pillman. These five wrestlers can work with the best of them and in the opinion of some fans, these five men are among the very best.

The AWA and World Class: Great Successes Now Only Memories

By - Paul J. MacArthur

Two of the most successful promotions in the early eighties are now for all intent and purpose dead. The AWA and World Class Championship Wrestling have faded from the scene and two promotions with such promise for long-term success eight years ago are gone.

In 1983, the two most successful promotions in the U.S. were the AWA and World Class. The AWA had Hulk Hogan, who even then was the top drawing wrestler, Nick Bockwinkel, The High Fliers, Tito Santana, Rick Martel and was drawing spectacular crowds. World Class had the Von Erichs, Jimmy Garvin, Chris Adams and the Freebirds, consistently sold out the Sportatorium and other venues and in 1984 drew the largest outdoor crowd in U.S. wrestling history. It appeared both of these promotions were preparing for long runs as the top two forces in wrestling. But they both failed and now they are virtually nonexistent.

The AWA was an extremely successful regional promotion and for a while enjoyed some national success. But, when the WWF began its national expansion, the AWA found itself unable to compete. For the AWA, failure came as a result of three major things. First, Verne Gagne was not willing to pay his wrestlers competitive salaries. Thus, he lost Hogan, Heenan, Jim Brunzell, Santana and eventually Martel, the Rockers, Sherri Martel and Curt Hennig in part because he simply wouldn't pay them the going market rate Vince McMahon established. Second, he failed to treat his wrestlers like human beings, as any wrestler who worked for him with the exception Greg Gagne, Larry Zbysko and possibly Nick Bockwinkel, would openly attest. It is impossible for a promoter to establish any sense of loyalty within his organization if he fails to treat his wrestlers well, particularly when many could jump to the WWF or the NWA and make better money. Finally, Gagne misused and failed to promote the talent he had. Bruiser Brody should have drawn as a monster heel, but Gagne had him be clobbered by his thin and

unconvincing son. When the AWA brought in Tony Atlas, he was still a hot babyface and they had him wrestle in handicap matches against Bruiser Brody. Gagne had the Road Warriors, and they worked for a while, but again, he couldn't keep them hot in the AWA's surroundings. In fact, the AWA's surroundings became conducive to one thing: boredom. The promotion became stagnant and rarely was there any action worth writing about. Thus, interest and crowds diminished and few people today, outside of a few loyal Minnesota residents, really care if the AWA were to ever run a card again. Gagne was unable and unwilling to adapt with the times. His promotion floundered and is now sinking. Today, the AWA has some television that has been filled with highlights of its glory years. There is certainly enough footage to run programs for years, but they may be the only fashion in which the AWA continues to exist as they haven't run a card in months and none are scheduled. The AWA may continue to provide television highlights for years, but they have really changed from a wrestling promotion to a syndicator.

World Class's success was, by and large, the result of the Von Erich/Freebirds feud that was probably the most important feud for any promotion during the eighties. There were, of course, other factors. World Class was, for a time, an innovator. They used music videos with the likable Von Erich clan that would become cliché in every major wrestling promotion. There was the use of multiple cameras and post production that left the other promotions in the dust. They came up with skits and angles that were fun to watch and drew in large crowds every week. David Von Erich became a star and was slated to win the NWA World Championship. Kevin and Kerry each had their own virtues and perhaps could still be major stars today if they were handled properly, but World Class was unable to do that. The one event that really helped shape the downfall of World Class was ironically what helped bring in the largest outdoor crowd in Texas Stadium. David Von Erich's death left World Class without its superstar. While Kerry and Kevin were stars in their own right, David was the promotion's top star and the one who could have remained on top for many years, particularly if he had Ric Flair to battle. Instead, David died in Japan and Kerry took his place to win the NWA World Championship, which he would lose three weeks later.

Kerry became the star of the promotion, but he couldn't carry the load by himself. Other hot feuds were developed, in particular the Chris Adams and Gino Hernandez vs. Kevin and Kerry feud, but Fritz Von Erich's insatiable desire to keep Kerry as the World Champion lead him to secede World Class from the NWA. The result was less talent from the NWA, in particular the NWA's World Champion, Ric Flair, who helped bring in some of World Class' largest gates ever, no longer appeared in World Class arenas. Gates dropped as fans suffered Von Erich burnout and World Class refused to establish top stars other than the Von Erichs. Drugs caused the promotion to lose David, Hernandez and Mike Von Erich. Eventually, there was no one with any marketability left.

World Class was sold to Jeff Jarrett and Eric Embry became the new booker. Not surprisingly, Embry also became the promotion's top star. An average wrestler with a poor physique, poor diction, poor looks, little charisma, but able to vomit in the ring, he was able to push himself hard and did actually have some success compared to the recent Dallas crowds. World Class became the USWA as Eric Embry took down the World Class banner in a moment that was kind of sad as it appeared a once great organization was now history. The USWA ran cards and Kevin was used sparingly, mostly his fault as he proved to be unreliable, and Kerry was regularly used until his WWF departure. But the Von Erich's didn't give up and even though he only owned 20 percent of the promotion, Kevin Von Erich was able to regain control of World Class. Well in a sense he was. What Jarrett gave him when he pulled out of Texas is still unclear. Kevin was able to promote in the Dallas Sportatorium, but he received none of Jarrett's television spots. He used the World Class name, but there really was nothing left as he had no television and too small a following to make any difference. The new World Class went under in a few months and now Jarrett is ready to take over the area again. What Kevin gained out of all this is unclear as it now appears since he let World Class go under, he owns no part of a new promotion Jarrett would bring in. But that's the type of business savvy that put the Von Erich's in the

position they are today. Now Kevin has aligned himself with the Savoldis and is once again threatening legal action. However, it is doubtful he'll have any more success than he did this summer.

This is not a thorough documentation of what went wrong with the AWA and World Class. It is just a condensed look at what happened. Each promotion would deserve a book for their successes, failures, politics and scandals. Rather, it is interesting to note two promotions that were powerhouses in the early eighties, when wrestling was strong and every organization had some good talent, are no longer. Now, two organizations control the bulk of wrestling talent in the U.S. and yet neither is able to, with rare exceptions, duplicate the regional success of the early eighties. When there was competition, there were promotions trying to do their best to provide quality shows and talent. Now there are two organizations with most of the talent and little competition. One has decided to provide hype and little substance. The other has yet to decide what it is trying to provide. Perhaps if there were more competition the current situation would be better as every organization would have to work to be the best they could be and market to certain niches. Instead, competition is slowly fading and the product quality seems to be fading with it. The AWA and World Class are really now just memories. We can only hope the excitement that once made these promotions successful can somehow be restored in today's "new and improved" state of wrestling.

Endnotes

I do not want to see the Republican party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny - fear, ignorance, bigotry and smear - Margaret Chase Smith - June 1, 1950 -

Diamonds are forever and so are the Horsemen - Ric Flair -

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*Next month's issue, featuring our year end awards, will be out in the last week of January.
Don't miss it.*